

The Fleeting Cross and the Eternal Crown

THE COMMANDMENTS OF CHRIST

THE PRESENT RULE OF LIFE FOR HIS FOLLOWERS

Our public proclamation of the Truth is predominantly doctrinal. This is necessary and right, for doctrine is greatly belittled and neglected in Christendom today, and, while true knowledge and belief must be the starting point for organizing the life in a godly pattern, we find conduct called in quickly to carry on the chain of development toward eternal life. True doctrine and conduct are inseparable.

It is Paul who says, "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us, therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in anything ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule." The principle here is clear—God reveals so much at a time. He does not lay all the treasures of His wisdom before the beginner. He presents sufficient to carry conviction and provide a starting point. If an individual sincerely conforms his life to what divine knowledge he has, he will be given more.

A practical application is necessary to bring full and mature conviction of doctrine. As the Psalmist says, "O taste and see that the Lord is good." Jesus plainly declared, "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God"—Ps. xxxiv; John vii. The knowledge of God is a progressive chain reaction: doctrine to conduct to doctrine, and so forth, and in this active, progressive experimental knowledge of God alone is life eternal. Many, as the Scriptures show, who start the race never reached the goal because they fail to move continually forward and upward in knowledge and godliness—John xvii, 3.

In order to free our minds from the deadly bias of human ideas in considering Christ's commands, we must first clearly grasp one basic principle. Jesus states, "That which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God." Unless we get this clear at the outset, we shall have constant trouble with the commands of Christ and finally end in confusion and failure. Paul strongly emphasizes the same thing in writing to the Corinthians, "Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" And again, "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak things to confound the mighty." And the reason he gives is short and to the point. "That no flesh should glory." Not only are man's ideas vain, they are also profitless. We must put aside all that man has told us before we can listen intelligently to God. This is the first lesson and its thorough appreciation is vital. "The whole world lieth in wickedness"—that is ungodliness, alienation from the mind and viewpoint of God—I John v, 19.

Arising directly from this principle—the diametric divergence between the mind of the flesh and the mind of God—is the first command of Christ; first, that is, in the sense of elementary basicness. Thus separation from the world becomes a primary necessity. This command underlies and precedes all the more specific ones.

In the brief, solemn period of exalted communion between God, Christ and His small band of followers just before the crucifixion, the broad, deep gulf between the world and the believers is sharply defined. To this little group He said, "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you"—John xv. And in His prayer emphasizes the sense of separation, "I have manifested Thy name to the men which Thou gavest me out of the world." "I pray for them: I pray not for the world." "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world."

Each New Testament writer in turn presents this basic theme. Defining the fundamentals of

true religion the Apostle says, "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world." Also, "Ye adulterers and adulteresses (this is the term the Scriptures use for those who mix the things of God and the things of the world), know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever, therefore, will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God"—James i and iv.

I John ii, 15-16, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For ALL that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world."

Paul is emphatic on the line of demarcation. "What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? Wherefore come ye out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord"—II Cor. vi.

Can we doubt its importance when the Scriptures stress it so strongly and solemnly? This then is the second step in comprehending the commands of Christ. It does not mean hermitage or seclusion any more than Christ or Paul were hermits. There can be no fraternity with the world in its enterprises, ambitions, politics or pleasures.

The world, as such, is the enemy of God and the Truth. It is one huge, organized, hypocritical embodiment of sin and ungodliness. This includes all forms and beliefs of religion invented by it and catering to public sentiments and popular desires. True religion, as defined by God through Christ, could never be popular, for it is a denunciation of all the world stands for and loves, and a command to be separate from it. It tells man that his natural course of life, whoever he may be, is evil and ungodly, and commands him to humbly submit and change his whole nature. It is not seclusion in a monkery that is demanded, but a clear distinction in every aspect of our lives.

At the beginning of his ministry Jesus outlined the basic principles of his teaching in what is commonly known as the "Sermon on the Mount." The principles were not new. They underlie all Scripture. But Christ carried them far deeper than ever before, and applied them specifically to the dispensation He was about to inaugurate. He enunciated them as fundamental principles of life.

The first seven commands in the Sermon define the character that is necessary to be acceptable with God. The first one is the deepest and most inclusive. It goes right to the heart of the matter, completely reversing the world's viewpoint. "Blessed are the poor in spirit"—Matt. v.

The word here translated poor—ptochos—is a very strong word. We are told by the lexicons that it was always used in a bad sense before Christ chose it as the badge of His followers. It means utterly destitute, mean, beggarly, abased, completely lacking in possession, position or self-assertion. It is the extreme opposite of high-spirited. It is the character and state the world most despises.

But God says, "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word." And our great Teacher and example said, "Learn of me for I am meek and lowly in heart"—Is. lxi and Matt. xi.

We must thoroughly realize the utter insignificance and helplessness of man. Abject lowliness and dependency is the only reasonable and sensible attitude when the true picture is perceived. God will not for a moment consider any who boldly and obstinately ignore these facts and regard themselves or mankind as of any consequence. The Spirit, through Isaiah, gives the evaluation of man in the sight of God, "Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance . . . All nations before Him are as nothing, and they are counted to Him

as less than nothing and vanity"—xl. The insignificance of man is established by Scripture. "Surely men of low degree are vanity, and men of high degree are a lie—laid in the balance, they are altogether lighter than a breath"—Ps. lxii. It is clear that Christ's way and viewpoint of life is not a formula for worldly success. This fact must be accepted at the outset. It is impossible to have both, although tremendous contortions are executed in a vain effort to get around this divinely stated principle.

Jesus' next words are: "Blessed are they that mourn." The earth, created for God's glory and man's happiness, is the scene of ever increasing vice, misery and ungodliness. Greed, pride, rivalry, hate and destruction are the basic characteristics of the structure man has erected.

A few, perceiving things in this true light, stand aside from all the giddy, thoughtless emptiness that veneers this dismal picture and mourn in the godly sense commanded by Christ. He is still dealing with the believer's attitude toward the world; He advances to details later. The details come easily once the main principles are comprehended.

"Blessed are the meek." This answers a natural question that arises. If these things be so—the great majesty and supremacy of God flouted, the utter insignificance of man denied and derided, and the whole world filled with violence and sin and enmity toward God—what is to be our attitude toward it? Shall we call down fire from heaven? Are we expected to ride forth like Jehu, condemning and destroying in our zeal for the Lord? Can we live at peace among them while God's heritage is desolated, His love rejected and His law despised?

"Blessed are the meek, for they SHALL inherit the earth." "My kingdom is not of THIS order of things, else would my servants fight," said Jesus. "And again, I am come to save men, not to destroy them." "In meekness instructing them that oppose themselves," is the apostolic instruction II Tim. ii, 25. Witnessing and instructing in meekness is the believer's duty now. The inheriting and purifying of the earth will come in God's good time to those who keep separate now, and discipline themselves in meekness.

Hungering and thirsting after righteousness is next commanded. Hunger and thirst are basic, ever-present and overpowering urges. The believer's desire to be pleasing in the sight of God must dominate his consciousness and direct all his actions.

Mercifulness is next for consideration. Perceiving the slippery deceptiveness of human nature, we see this is mentioned in just the right order. The trend of the foregoing would lead the flesh, if unchecked, to assert itself in harshness and uncharitableness. But mercy, let us remember, means waiving our own advantages and interests out of consideration for others. In the words of Paul, it "suffereth long and is kind . . . seeketh not her OWN . . . endureth all things." It does not mean the much easier and more flesh-pleasing course of compromising God's truth for the sake of peace or sentiment or popularity—I Cor. xiii.

Now purity of heart commands our attention. Here too is a necessary warning. We are dealing with subtle and evil influences within ourselves which cling tenaciously and parade as every form of virtue to avoid being exposed and cast out. Those who accept Christ's teaching must get right to the bottom of things or the end will be worse with them than the beginning. Sincerity, consistency, and freedom from hypocrisy are essential. The only assurance is constant self-examination, study and prayer.

The question of peace now comes before us. "I came not to bring peace, but a sword," said Christ—Matt. x. But peace only on a sound basis must be the believer's constant aim, and he must labour tirelessly for it. There can never be peace except on God's own prescribed terms. Strife is always destructive. All personal desires, and everything that does not jeopardize the faith that God commands us to defend, must be freely yielded for the sake of peace. All

unessentials that trouble the peace of others must be graciously and ungrudgingly given up for the same reason. Obedience to this command, in the bonds of love, would eliminate almost all the sad and destructive friction among believers.

Now comes an assertion—startling. "Ye are the salt of the earth." The command is that we maintain our sharp, fresh saltiness. It is the believer's duty to exhale purity in a world of corruption; a sharp, invigorating influence in a mass of sickly insipidity. For that reason we must realize Christ's next dictum. "Ye are the light of the world." "Let your light so shine that men may see your good works and glorify God." Your allegiance to God, once you take it on, must be open and obvious. Jesus said: "Whosoever confesseth me before men, him will I confess before my Father: whosoever is ashamed of me, of him will I be ashamed"—Matt. x, 32 ; Mark viii, 38. Your conduct must be outstandingly noticeable and must reflect glory to God. Your disposition must attract others to seek the reason of your graciousness and peace.

Now let us view the all-important matter of self control. "Whosoever shall say, thou fool, shall be in danger of hell-fire." Even angels, we are told "dare not bring a railing accusation, but say, the Lord rebuke thee." Christ's injunctions call for the bridling of the tongue. We are no good for God's use until we learn to control ourselves. "The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God"—Jude ix; Jas. i and iii. It is the key to self-discipline. "Therefore, if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." A constant, active seeking for reconciliation in all things. A tireless effort to strengthen and heal and unite, with no thought of self-justification. How opposed to the proud, selfish, inconsiderate spirit of the world!

So next we read: "Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. Verily I say unto thee, thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing." Illustrating the force and significance of the commands to mercy and peacemaking. If God, the great Judge of all, stood on His rights, all flesh would perish—all would pay the uttermost farthing of eternal destruction. Man has no rights. He is commanded to yield what he considers his rights in any dispute (not involving the integrity of the Truth), in the faith that God will treat him likewise and make it all up to him, and in the humble knowledge that he needs it to a far greater degree.

In verse 28 is brought out the principle that sin is not limited to action, but reaches right back to intention and unresisted desire. The commands of Christ are no surface righteousness, but search unsparingly to the uttermost depths of the heart. Consider how far the world has strayed from God's conception of marriage, "Whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery." The daily flaunting of this solemn injunction is an honoured and accepted thing in all walks of life that blasphemously brand themselves as "Christian."

Christ forbids oaths or swearing of any kind. James is equally emphatic and unqualified. "Above all things, swear NOT AT ALL." This is to sweep away all the complicated and meaningless fabric that man has erected in a vain fig-leaf effort to deal with his own natural deceptiveness and untruthfulness.

All the oaths and adjurations that are meant to bolster truth only cheapen and weaken it. Disease cannot be destroyed by merely building a fence around it—it must be stamped out at the root. Jesus goes to the heart of the evil, and lays the simple, all-sufficient basis of rigid truth in every word that is uttered—no falsehood, no foolishness—Rev. xxii, 15; I John ii, 21; Eph. v, 4. "God hath no pleasure in fools."

Now comes the very heart of the Christ message, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: but I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." Here we reach the acid-test of the godly character. No words in Scripture are clearer than these, but how universally the so-called "Christian" world looks coldly on them, and then passes by on the other side! Consider their endless struggles for position, possession and power in every sphere—personal, national and international.

"And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee, turn not thou away. Ye have heard that it hath been said, thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you."

Utterly impractical . . . utterly impossible—except for the fact that God is underwriting the success of these commands. It is all a matter of faith and dependence upon the promise and power of God. These commandments are the key to the gospel of Christ. We can go no deeper than this. The issue between serving God and serving the world reaches its climax at this point. Here is the faith that overcomes the world. Choose ye this day whom ye will serve, and in whom ye will put your trust.

And what is the purpose of these commands? Is it not "that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven."

Nothing could be added to make these commands clearer. They are simple and specific. The basic principle is to pursue a fixed, consistent course of active benefit to everyone, utterly regardless of any antagonism, injury or unworthiness on their part, without concern for self-protection or self-preservation, and unrestricted by any consideration of consequences or expediency. The mind must rise far above all bitterness and resentment and thought of self. It is a gloriously free, exalted, revolutionary doctrine. It makes the narrow, natural, selfish way of living utterly contemptible by comparison. It is living like God in a world of petty little men.

Jesus himself is the only perfect example, but the early believers, filled with the unearthly joy of the Spirit, followed cheerfully in his footsteps. Paul bears witness, "Ye took joyfully"—note particularly the word "joyfully"—that is the whole life and spirit of the matter. "Ye took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance"—Heb. x. And to the Corinthians he had to say, "Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? Why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?"—I Cor. vi.

Continuing, we may next read, "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven." How well he fathomed human nature and discerned its weakness! Nothing to be done for show or appearances, for verily such self-glorifiers have their reward, and what a pitiful, empty reward it is!—Matt. vi. "But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: that thine alms may be in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret Himself shall reward thee openly." Not just avoidance of show, but every effort to be made for secrecy. Some have affected to see a contradiction between this and the command to let your light shine that men may see your good works, but the mind of wisdom will have no difficulty in perceiving that as much as possible can be done secretly and still the whole life be one of light and good works that cannot be hid.

Prayer and fasting are cited as further examples of worshipping God secretly and sincerely

and with avoidance of all show. Outward show always goes with inward emptiness and shallowness. Simple, secret service is just the reverse.

Forgiveness by God will depend on forgiveness toward men. This principle is applied to many things: as ye forgive, so shall ye be forgiven; as ye judge, so shall ye be judged; as ye give, so shall ye receive; as ye minister, so shall ye be ministered to; as ye confess Christ, so shall ye be confessed; as ye are ashamed of Him and conceal your relationship to Him, so shall he do to you. It is indeed as a man soweth so shall he reap. Thus in all things it is direct cause and effect. There is no magic or mystery, but clear, simple divine law. Each man, each day, is determining his final reward or lack of reward. It is all perfectly just and perfectly reasonable.

The Master says, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven." The divine unearthliness and unworldliness of Jesus' teaching is nowhere more apparent than here, and how clear the reason he gives, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." If your treasure is on earth, your heart is set on earthly things, but if your treasure is in heavenly things, your heart will be with God and Christ, and where your heart is centered will determine your whole character and destiny.

Jesus' deep insight, by the Spirit, is revealed in Matt. vi, 21. He has presented two kinds of treasure. The flesh will of course say, "Why not have both?" But reason and Scripture answer, No. The reasoning is very plain. If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light; but if thine eye be not single, but evil, or double, thy body shall be full of darkness. This principle is extended into the next command—"No man can serve two masters. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon." A true allegiance cannot be divided, though greed will tempt us to try. "A double-minded man," James says, "is unstable in all his ways. Let not that man think that he shall receive anything of the Lord." If we seek both, we lose all!

So greed is ruled out. "Therefore I say unto you, take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment?" "For after all these things do the Gentiles seek: for your Heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God: and all these things shall be added unto you." What a wonderful assurance! Seek God and obey Him, and let Him look after your wants and cares. Sometimes, in the success of strength and pride, this may seem like a poor and unattractive bargain, but time and wisdom will teach its value and infinite desirability. "Cast all your care upon Him, for He careth for you"—I Pet. v.

Christ does not teach slothfulness. His is preeminently a gospel of hard and persistent labour, but labour of the right kind and to the right end.

What He does command, and that most emphatically, is this: "Having food and raiment, BE THEREWITH CONTENT." Christ's followers are told not to be concerned beyond the needs of the present, and not to accumulate beyond the necessities of life. No VICE IS MORE STRONGLY CONDEMNED IN SCRIPTURE THAN GREED—the fleshly lust to have more than is needed. This is said to be the root of all evil—I Tim. vi.

Stewardship and bondservice is the description Jesus gives of the lives of his followers. They are simply stewards for Him as to their time, energies and any goods they possess, and they will have to give a strict account of their stewardship when He returns. "Ye are not your own," He says to them through Paul (I Cor. vi, 19-20), "ye are bought with a price." There is a great reckoning to come. This solemn obligation is illustrated in a parable he spoke, Matt. xxv—"For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his servants and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another

one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey." Some faithfully used the talents in their master's service, some did not. Then, "After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them." Let us ponder this well, for the day of judgment is already decreed.

Lastly, Christ gives the reward of the faithful. "Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord." Conversely is the punishment of the unfaithful, "And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

This is emphasized in Luke xvi: "I say unto you, make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness (that is, put it to the use commanded so that it will become treasure in heaven); that when it (R.V.) fails, they may receive you into everlasting habitations." "If ye therefore have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon (that is, if you have used it for yourself instead of for God), who will commit to your trust the true riches?"

And we note particularly that "the Pharisees also, who were covetous, heard all these things: and they derided him." Above all things, let us not be in that class!

Such are the commands of Christ, and the ministry for Him to which we are invited. These commands reduce the faithful to the simple necessities of life, and involve constant effort and labour until they die or the Master returns. Jesus describes this ministry as the bearing of a cross, and such it truly is for the flesh, for the flesh must be crucified—Rom. viii, 12-14. It is the fleeting cross, but the eternal crown.

It will cause us to be unpopular and despised, as Jesus foretold, and will put us at a continual disadvantage in temporal things. The Pharisees, who are covetous, will deride us, for they will feel the pinch of our example.

All this and far more, the Apostle Paul himself constantly endured, and still he joyfully exclaimed, "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory."

It is the only life that provides real, substantial satisfaction, contentment and peace; the power and communion of God is promised without measure for its successful accomplishment, and finally it will eventuate in glorious eternity in an assembly of the best and noblest characters of all ages, when all pettiness, selfishness and meanness will have been swept forever away.

—G.V.Growcott, *The Berean Christadelphian*, Sept. 1948